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Abstract

Nowadays, an intercultural component needs to be integrated in the development of any business course and research in the field of Intercultural Studies outlines issues directly relevant to the Business world. Research findings have underlined the complexity of concepts such as Culture and Stereotypes. In the light of these findings, future business courses incorporating an intercultural dimension should be developed.

I Introduction

Is globalisation reducing distances between societies? Are we becoming more identical? Although people complain about the similarities of shopping centres across Europe, this uniformity only happens at a superficial level. At a deeper level, studies show that differences between cultures are difficult to erase or overlook. Far from making every one fit in the same template, globalisation encourages differences, as Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars explain: "(…) cultural characteristics appear to persist long-term, even when managers cooperate cross-culturally. In longitudinal studies, British and French management students, educated together at INSEAD in Fontainbleu (sic), near Paris, became more distinctly British and French culturally as the course progressed. Eurocrats in Brussels, after 18 years of collaborative, international work, become more distinctively national in their views." (1994: p. 375). The same is true in multinational corporations where "cross-cultural interaction reminds members of various notions of the differences between one set of cultural views and another, and this seems to lead to a slight intensification of cultural traits, perhaps to protect and confirm these and so maintain identity" (ibid.).

In a market place such as Ireland where survival depends on the ability to export, it is highly important to define a strategy which will help companies to develop a cultural competence. At the time when products need to become global, companies must understand the complexity of the market they wish to trade with and the complexity of its customers. Courses in Business must reflect this situation and equip the workforce with a sufficient level of intercultural competence.

In Intercultural Studies, Culture and Stereotypes are two basic concepts which need to be considered. This paper will present a quick overview of landmark researches in the field, with a particular attention on stereotypes. It will finally sketch the type of course needed to be

developed if we want to effectively educate the business force of tomorrow.

II Culture and Stereotypes

2.1 What is Culture?

Culture is a widely used term apparently understood by everybody but which turns out to be complex under close scrutiny. First of all, culture does not exist in a vacuum and can only be defined in respect and comparison to another one. Each group emphasises its own value in comparison with other groups: each group defines itself against other groups and will reinforce its own rules and values when in contact with other groups: Gauthey and Xardel note that identity only exist in difference: "L'identité n'existe que dans le rapport au différent" (1990: p23). They add that when mixed, differences do not tend to disappear (the contrary seems to be happening) because cultural codes are deeply rooted at the emotional and subconscious levels. In 1990 they forecasted that intercultural tensions would *increase* as the world becomes globalised and they seem to have been proven right.

The following represents a body of research which needs to be considered when developing an appropriate business syllabus.

Edward.T. Hall is an influential American Researcher who worked as an army engineer in Europe for several years, a position which gave him the appropriate personal experience for the basis of his research. His work focuses particularly on the cultural differences regarding time, space and context. In his book called *The Silent Language* (1959), he opposes two systems; a monochrone system like in the USA or Germany where tasks are dissociated, where there is a high level of planning, and an agenda needs to be set and a polychrone system in which several tasks can be done at the same time, with a possibility of changing the agenda. In these societies visual contact is important, and gestural language is used, in Southern Europe for instance. Since his first book, Hall has been researching intercultural communication extensively with a particular interest in non-verbal communication, which he claims represent 70% of the totality of a message and is culturally coded. He has applied his theory to the Business world in books such as *Hidden Differences: Studies in International Communication* and more recently *Understanding cultural differences* (1990).

Another prominent figure in Intercultural Studies is Geer Hofstede who conducted a massive research in one firm (IBM) throughout the world and identified the now classic four main factors of differences between cultures:

1. Uncertainty avoidance

2. Power distance

3. Masculinity-femininity

4. Individualism-collectivism

Through an extensive use of survey, questionnaires and interviews, he succeeded in defining several cultures in relation to the four items listed above. Each culture has been classified as having high or low uncertainty avoidance, high or low power distance, etc. This classification is actually very helpful for managers in Intercultural situations as it helps to forecast and maybe solve problems as they arise in Intercultural settings. For example, in his books Hofstede develops the concept of hierarchical distance, which depends on historical and religious contexts. He claims that it can be more or less long; from Great-Britain (short), to United-States (middle) to France, Latin and developing countries.

Further ground-breaking research was conducted by Fons Trompenaars in the early 90s. In his book *Riding the waves of Culture*, Trompenaars describes culture as "the way in which a group of people solves problems" (1993: p.6 in bold). For him, culture is "a shared system of meanings" (1993: p.13). He identifies several layers in any given culture, and explains that "Culture comes in layers, like an onion, to understand it you have to unpeel it layer by layer" (1993, p.6). Trompenaars defines the first layer (*outer layer*) as being the explicit products of a culture: language, food, culture, shrines, markets, fashion, arts or buildings. For instance, skyscrapers in the U.S. show the importance of private power, the importance of upward mobility, the idea that the more the better and the focus on material success which are pillars of American society (to some extent, as always, as these values seem to emerge from a Protestant ethic). The second layer is called *middle layer* and encompasses norms (what is right and wrong, written laws or social control: "This is how I should act") and values (what is good or bad, ideals; "This is how I desire/aspire to behave) of a society. Finally, the *core of a culture* is organised around its assumptions about existence. Trompenaars also presents three levels of culture: national, corporate (or organisational) and professional. The latter posits that for example two Human Resources Managers might share more values and have more in common than two people from the same country but from a different professional background (see also Singer, 1998). However there is a strong case for cultural differences in the work place, as noticed by Trompenaars, where for example North-Western Europeans can be defined by their need for analysis, logic, systems and rationality whereas Euro-Latins are more person-related, use more intuition and sensitivity (1993: p.7).

Finally, Gauthey and Xardel (1990) have defined eight main cultural environments, which

cover different functions and where understanding difficulties can arise. These levels will have to be analysed before any business venture deals with a different culture:

1. Religion/dogma (meaning: can vary from Muslim fatalism to Protestant action)

2. Language (communication: verbal and non-verbal)

3. Society (organisation: more or less egalitarian). France has also less social mobility than America. (Six times more executive from lower middle class in America than in France)

4. Education (formation and transmission. They posit that France's education system privileges a conceptual and deductive approach whereas in Anglo-Saxon education, an empirical -through case studies- approach is favoured.)

5. Economy (production and distribution)

6. Political system (authority)

7. Legislative system (rule making: common law -deciding on the basis of previous cases or Roman law based on a constitution)

8. Technology (creation: hardware-tools, machinery, buildings, etc. /software -sciences, culture, technology…)

As these lists show, culture is a highly complex concept which can be understood from different points of view: it is all the more important to keep these different aspects in mind when developing a course.

The main problem lies in the fact that when we communicate with other cultures, we perceive their behaviour through our own cultural frame and alien attitudes might not suit ours. Bessis (in Bosche, 1990; p.142) remarks that "Apprendre une langue, des langues n'est pas fondamentalement hors de portée. Ce qui est plus ardu, c'est d'envisager la langue non seulement comme des mots et des sonorités différentes des nôtres, mais comme un ensemble langue-culture. Il est effectivement plus difficile de communiquer dans une langue si on ne la rattache pas à la civilisation, à la représentation mentale qui la sous-tend." (To learn a language is not an impossible task. What is more difficult is to apprehend language not only as words and sounds different from our own but also as a language-culture package. It is effectively more difficult to communicate in a language if we do not attach it to the civilisation, the mental representation that lies under it).

She also notes that: "Aborder une négociation interculturelle ne nécessite pas seulement de connaître ses objectifs, ses marges de manoeuvre et le fond du dossier. Il est beaucoup plus indispensable et efficace de s'être entrainé au décodage des messages non-verbaux, ce qui

inclut la connaissance de l'étiquette" (To deal with an intercultural negotiation, not only you need to know the objectives, your leeway and the bottom facts but you need to know how to decode non-verbal messages, including etiquette) (in Bosche, M., 1990: p.147). These two points are extremely important to keep in mind when developing business courses; Bessis points out that in order to be efficient professionally, our business students need more than their usual business skills with a language on top of that. They also need, and maybe even more so, a real cultural competence. A year abroad such as the ones organised through Erasmus definitely contributes to the students' experience of intercultural relations but it might not be as positive as lecturers would like them to be. The reality is that students need tools with which they can make the most of such an experience.

Particularly, individuals do not realise the influence of their culture on their behaviour although their culture has major repercussions on their perceptions and on the organisation of the group they belong to: Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars explain that "there is in every culture a tacit dimension, a set of beliefs that are subconscious because the members of that culture take these so for granted that they fall below the threshold of awareness" (, 1994: p.2). In France, for instance, hierarchical structures can be found at every level of society: French culture puts an emphasis on power and French society is highly hierarchical with little mobility, an elitist education system and a patriarchal family structure (Gauthey and Xardel, 1990: p.18). However, culture is always evolving and in the world of business where intercultural mergers are becoming extremely common; "Il faut bien garder à l'esprit ici que la culture n'est pas quelque chose de figée, d'ancrée dans le passé qui s'opposerait à tout changement, mais est au contraire une force vivante qui, prise en considération, peut permettre de cristalliser des projets de société holistes et donner ainsi une orientation au développement » (one has to keep in mind that culture is not something set in stone, attached to the past and against any kind of change, on the contrary, culture is a living force, which, when taken in account, can enable the creation of holistic project and thus give a new direction to development) (Eberhard, 1996: p.6). Of course, the question of whether or not cultural competences can be taught should also be investigated.

2.2 Stereotypes and Intercultural behaviour

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a stereotype is a "widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing". Any intercultural knowledge takes its root at the stereotype level. Stereotypes are sometimes dismissed as something that should not be considered in intercultural studies courses because they are perceived as inherently dangerous and misleading. However, while stereotypes should not form the main framework of the course, they do represent an essential part of our ability to understand others and hence

should be integrated in any intercultural curriculum. The key when dealing with stereotypes is to recognise them for what they are: a ready-made box where to put people who do not fit in our own. They represent a powerful classification device and help understanding and memory by helping people to construct frames that enable them to foresee and plan actions. This functionality has the danger of simplifying reality at a conceptual level and often results in discrimination. One is expected to go beyond; one always has to start from the admission of the stereotype and try to understand it (from the perspective of both the person who emits and the person who receives it) (Bosche, 1990). "Il est important d'interroger l'outil de mesure, qui n'est certainement pas neutre culturellement lorsqu'on interroge les différences culturelles." (It is important to consider the measurement tool, which is certainly not neutral when dealing with cultural differences) (Bosche M., 1990: 101). In addition, although stereotypes have an inherent capacity to evolve depending on situations -education and mobility have for instance an impact on stereotypes- they can be difficult to dissipate. In the development of courses, stereotypes form a base on which to start reflecting on intercultural issues because every culture has developed some sort of stereotype, sometimes to such an extent that it appears in its language (in French for instance, "être saoul comme un polonais" -to be drunk as a Pole). To this form of stereotype must be added a more pernicious one, which appears as *expectations* towards an alien culture (For example, French are often portrayed as being rude). Too often, these hidden stereotypes jeopardize the intercultural exchange. Bosche notices that "La connaissance en management interculturel se limite encore trop souvent à des stéréotypes" (too often intercultural management is limited to this type of stereotype) (1993: p.12). The line between observed cultural traits (generalisations and interpretations of actions by an outsider) of such and such culture and stereotype is very thin and it is important to examine the two very closely when dealing with intercultural situations. For instance, when Trompenaars posits that "The French tend to identify with la *France*, la *famille*, le *cadre*; the Japanese with the corporation; the former eastern block with the communist party; and Ireland with the Roman Catholic Church" (1994, p. 53). The stereotype of the Irish as primarily belonging to the Catholic Church group seems to be oversimplified nowadays.

Here is a questionnaire that can be used as a practical survey in the intercultural class. An adaptation from Cazal in Bosche, (1990: pp196-209), it works well as an ice-breaker to start a discussion about stereotypes.

Item	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Stereotypes regarding values			
French people appreciate beauty			
French people know how to enjoy life			
French people are rude			

French people are religious			
French men are machos			
French people have no scruples			
French people feel pity for others in difficulty			
French people lie easily			
French people accept that others' differences			
French people do not have a critical mind			
French people are proud			
French people have respect for the old			
French people have respect for others who have been there for a longer amount of time			
French people do not say what they think			
French people are patriots			
French people are materialists			
French people have humour			
French people give sexuality too much importance			
2. Stereotypes regarding usage			
Social etiquette is more important than personal consideration for French people			
French people eat unappetizing food			
French people know how to behave at the table			
French people know how to drink			
French people take great pride in their clothes			
French people have a particular way to organise their desk			
3. Stereotype concerning relation towards Time			
French people can do several things at the same time			
French people establish clear priorities in their work			
French people plan their agenda several weeks ahead			
French people scrupulously follow the established programme			
French people are always on time for a meeting			
French people want to have results too quickly			
French people are loyal			
French people can hold engagements			
4. Stereotypes concerning cognitive modes			
French people think in the same way as Irish			
French people are very logical			
French people always notice small details			
French people have difficulties with abstraction			
French people anticipates facts with logic			
French people believe more in their feelings than in their intellect			
French people are intuitive			
French people have more an abstract than a concrete mind			
5. Stereotypes regarding emotional expression modes			
French people are loyal in friendship			
French people have an inferiority complex			
French people listen to people			
French people are emotionally fragile			
French people can are very sensitive to other people's feelings			
French people know how to avoid ridicule to someone else in an embarrassing situation			
French people are aggressive when in a stressful situation			
French people show easily their resentment in conversation			
French people think that you should also say disagreeable things in conversation			
French people remain calm under pressure			
French people keep quiet in stressful situation			
French people have a good heart			
French people are afraid of being ridiculed			
6. Stereotypes regarding volition			

French people want to be efficient first of all			
French people start a new work with enthusiasm			
French people have a tendency to complete their work quickly but badly			
French people are hard-working			
French people think before acting			
French people lack will			
French people have strong work methods			
French people are easily discouraged			
French people are creative in their work			
French people use their manual ability to counter-act their intellectual disabilities			
7. Stereotypes regarding non-verbal communication			
French people are quite attractive			
French people's face is very expressive			
French people often smile			
French people use their hands when speaking			
French people look at others intensively			
French people only look at others' eyes furtively			
French people look others right into their eyes			
French people keep their eyes down as a symbol of humility			
French people smell			
French people like physical contact			
French people speak very close			
French people fear silence in conversation			
French people speak too much			

Cazal notices that people responding to such questionnaires have a tendency to answer and not use the third choice "do not know" and calls this a "propension à savoir" (a propensity to know) (in Bosche, 1990; p.210).

In conclusion, stereotypes represent a good introduction to intercultural studies because they are easily accessible, present in every group and used by everybody. However, as we saw in the first part of this paper, Culture is a highly complex concept which permeates several layers: they should only be a stepping stone in intercultural studies. The following section will present some ideas that should be considered when designing a course.

III Designing an International Business Course

Nowadays practically all businesses need to be international. Intercultural situations are becoming increasingly common and there are several levels where misunderstanding might happen. A holistic business course should have at least one component preparing the students to the shock of dealing with another culture.

First of all students should be made aware of the obstacles to intercultural communication. As a start, the lack of knowledge of one's own culture and its implications should be considered. In order to communicate efficiently with other cultures, students should be expected to have some knowledge of their own culture, even if not in depth; they should have a notion of their

history, the geo-political situation of their country and should be made aware of current affairs. Business students should also have knowledge of at least another culture in the same way. The study of both these would feed into each other and should always be consciously integrated into each other. In order for this to work, students have to be reminded of the importance of this knowledge. The *Elise* research conducted by the Interesource Group Consulting is a good start as it shows to what extent Irish companies need business people with an international competence (39% of Irish companies recognised having lost business due to a misunderstanding with a European partner). Gauthey and Xardel add that "(…) toutes les négociations commerciales nécessitent le développement d'un langage commun pour échanger de l'information, des concepts, des intentions." (All commercial negotiations need the development of a common language in order to exchange information, concepts and intentions) (1990: p.83). Knowing other cultures also help to combat ethnocentrism and go beyond stereotypes.

A set of good practice will be encouraged as early as possible through knowledge of own and others' culture, language, willingness to take part in other culture and be ready for change. What Gauthey and Xardel propose is to try to analyse and prevent divergences and use them to create synergies, which will make the most of cultural differences. For example, According to Amado, Faucheux and Laurent, American organisations are represented by a system of tasks and goals to achieve where management is a tool to reach these goals. On the other hand, Latin organisations focus on people, organised in a hierarchy according to a vertical distribution. (Gauthey and Xardel, 1990: p13). These discrepancies may result in loss of competitiveness and business. Some solutions can be envisaged regarding communication (interpersonal, person/group, institutional) and organisation (assignment of responsibility, structures, planning) and human resources management (selection, mobility, etc). Only managers with a knowledge of both their own and other cultures will be able to benefit from the cultural differences at hand. Additionally, a solution could be to help students to create new cultures that will be suitable for all in future organisations.

Solutions to intercultural problems lie in the internationalisation of business courses and the internationalisation of students. They must be ready to study abroad for at least a few months. Tomorrow's business people need to understand what is at stake in intercultural exchanges and recognise differences within their organisation and/or with their partners and customers. Cultural differences can only become an asset if the management knows how to use it; managers need to master at least one foreign language and to gain a cultural competence which will help him or her to survive in any intercultural setting.

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